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From means to occasion: walking in the life of homeless people

ALAN RADLEY, KERRY CHAMBERLAIN, DARRIN HODGETTS, OTTILIE STOLTE and SHILOH GROOT

This article discusses walking by homeless people, who were asked to take photographs of their everyday lives. These individuals walked to take their pictures, and they used their photographs to explain the walking that homeless people do. Stories about photographs taken were used to explain the significance of different modes of walking, as means, as condition and as occasion. Rather than see walking as integral with a kind of method – or ready-made technique – the authors argue that whatever walking ‘is’ emerges in the course of producing (not just analysing) that experience. They suggest that walking tears at the fabric of symbols and voiced conventions to produce traces and dissonances that invite repair – repair through ‘storying’ the journeys made.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this article derives from our investigations into the lives of homeless people, both in Auckland and Hamilton (New Zealand) and previously in London (Radley, Hodgetts, and Cullen 2005; Hodgetts et al. 2008). For many people who live on the streets, walking becomes something of a way of life. Investigating this practice opens up the question of how this might be different from ‘mere walking’, or alternatively, from walking as an art form. In the former instance, walking serves mainly as a means of locomotion. This is not to say that it is unimportant, because in the course of ‘mere walking’ places are made and unmade, spaces are opened and circumvented (de Certeau 1984). In the latter circumstance – as an art form – walking is not so much that which runs through and across, as that which delineates a separable time-space that attains its own positivity by interposing itself between other situations. At its simplest, to ‘go for a walk’ is to make a time that sets aside other matters, if not completely, then at least reflecting them against the passing experiences of scenery and other people. Of course, it is possible that for those with no other means of transportation, and for

individuals who make walking their main recreation, it becomes a ‘way of life’. However, in neither case is this the same as the situation of the person who is compelled to walk, perhaps for several hours of the day, towards an end point that is not of their choosing. For such walkers, the act of walking is not something that is chosen to provoke constructive reflection – it is the outcome of processes of enforced mobility and exclusion (Sibley 1995). And yet, it would be a mistake to think that all of their walking is defined by this condition; there is a need to acknowledge what has been called recently ‘the tactical rationalities of homeless people’ (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2008).

We chose to use still photography as part of our methodology because it is ideally suited to the study of people’s settings, providing a pictorial dimension by means of which respondents can tell their story. Asking homeless people to take pictures involved them in walking to chosen locations. In the course of talking about their photographs subsequently, they revealed the different ways in which walking figures in their lives.

As we have argued elsewhere, the use of photographic displays is not merely a spur to better interviews (though it is this as well): the requirement to justify, explain and ultimately take responsibility for the pictures one creates produces a different relationship of interviewer to research participant (Radley and Taylor 2003; Hodgetts, Chamberlain, and Radley 2007). This can be brought forward in the research process by the investigator accompanying respondents, recording their meeting using either still photography or video (Pink 2007; Carpiano 2009). In this way the data – or what can be made of them – are tied up with the means of producing them. This means that not only are the data coloured by the approach taken, but the approach is also figured in the data. Summarised as *photo-production*, this is not a new technique, but in using this term we point up the fact that photography does not elicit what is already

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FIGURE 1. Stairway.

there, but is integral with the production of something else as well. This is the making of a 'picturing occasion', so that the intervention of the camera produces a time and space that is beyond the frame but vital to the explication of what is shown in the picture. 'Why I took this photo'; 'where I took this'; 'when I took this' – these are all questions that refer to the presence of the respondent, and (as we shall show) the presence of the investigator as well.

In our research using cameras we have found still photography – when it comes to actually using it – to be anything but still. Using cameras involves people in a fair amount of movement in order to take photographs – considerable movement, in the case of some of our homeless respondents. What that movement might be about is the focus of this article – walking to make photographs, ordering pictures so as to talk through them, telling and making up stories.

WALKING – HOMELESS PEOPLE

Our research has involved asking homeless people to take photographs of significant aspects of their day – their life – and then talk about these in interview. For

these individuals, a typical day can involve a considerable amount of journeying on the street, to and from places. Walking appears both directly – pictured in the photos – and through the people talking about what they photographed. This is important, as whatever it is that we learn from this approach emerges somehow in the act of looking and telling. Related to this is that picturing one's life as a homeless person involves first making pictures to reflect one's story, and then describing and explaining the photographs for another person. What comes across here is that there is variation in the distance between the pictures captured and the story people want to tell. Several respondents were clear that their photographs had not quite captured their story. This was either for technical reasons or because they could not access the place they wanted to photograph. In this latter case, pictures of places that were not taken were sometimes described in detail, so as to try to capture in words features that could not be shown (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, and Radley 2007).

At the same time, nearly all of the photographs were in excess of what the respondents could say about them. They showed other things, had technical aberrations, revealed in ways not anticipated – all of which demanded



FIGURE 2. Street scene.

some disclaimer, some other explanation for what was shown or not shown clearly. These photos – as with all photos – contained traces of their production.

There are two distinct moments, if you like, in this way of researching. One involves the making of the photos – in this case, the walking as part of photo production. The other involves the ‘storying’ of the pictures, the talking out of the ‘whys and wherefores’ of walking that justify and explain the linkages between images, the absences and the unseen consequences. These two moments were in varying balance across the interviews we made with the homeless people. Walking as one feature of their daily lives varied according to this changing accent upon the making of the pictures and the telling of their stories.

In this article we describe three kinds of walking revealed through the ways homeless people make and discuss photographs: walking as a means; walking as a condition; and walking as an occasion.

The photograph shown in Figure 1 was one in a series produced by a homeless man in London. It illustrates one kind of movement captured in homeless people’s photographs, easily summarised as ‘going to and from places’ in the course of the day. Walking here is a means to an end in taking the camera to places so that they can be captured on film and brought back for the interviewer. This is walking as a means ‘to go’, ‘to get’, ‘to get to’, a linking of places and activities that, in a sense, keeps walking in the background. Several of our homeless respondents spoke of the distances they travelled in order to get photos of such places as old sleeping haunts, or places where homeless people gather. Some mentioned that they would have pictured places but ‘it was too far to walk’.

This series of stills is almost like a video diary in the sequential movement about the neighbourhood (Pink



FIGURE 3. Street scene.

2007). Walking, for this respondent, is a taken-for-granted movement around the city in the course of his day, a movement that links up places and spaces told in a relatively non-conscious way. This does not detract from the importance of walking as a way of constituting one’s setting (Lee and Ingold 2006), though, as we have noted, it backgrounds that activity in order that the actions and events that stimulate it can be made explicit.

This series of photographs also showed walking as a substantive part of the life of people who spend much of their time on the streets. Many have to spend the day outside and access the hostel only at night. Some told us that they spend the day on the streets voluntarily – even when they have a room in a hostel – because they prefer to be outside and on the move. Not only that, but walking the streets with friends – usually other homeless people – is preferable to staying indoors alone.

These pictures were unusual in the sense that most photographs provided by our respondents did not show journeying, but showed the places and spaces traversed. The act of going somewhere was in itself rarely revealed in their photographs. People walked to a place to photograph it. For example, one young man showed us where he went to obtain money – he begged at Waterloo Station in London – and then went on to show where he spent this money in Brixton market.

Looking at Figures 2 and 3 we see that walking to and from the places pictured is not just a means of this individual obtaining the photographs, but is also revealed – in his talk about the places – as something he does in order to pursue his daily life. Walking in these photos emerges as part of a storied, purposeful activity, something bound up with what this person did to obtain what he saw as the necessities of life. The story is told through the pictures, so that they punctuate events supported by walking. In a way,



FIGURE 4. Birds.

the walking that this man does is not so different from the walking that most citizens do in their everyday lives as a means of traversing space to get from A to B.

However, this is not the sort of walking that is often identified with homeless people, who are thought of as having to walk the streets – a kind of enforced walking, as a *condition*. There were several examples of this in people's accounts of living on the streets. Among these was Jean's story (all names used are pseudonyms) about her regular walk at night, a routine ordered to maximise her safety, so that:

I go round to the café in the railway station, this is very late at night and I get a meat pie because I'm hungry and a cup of tea and then I go and sit on the office step that I used to sleep on and that's my sort kind of . . . routine . . . Seeing who's around. Very boring really but it's safe and keeps you safe . . . It keeps you from men picking you up and thinking you're a prostitute. You don't have to give favours.

By creating her routine on the streets Jean was doing something typical of (housed) women in general.

Valentine (1989) has argued that a woman's perception of safety in her local neighbourhood is related to how well she knows her surroundings. We might say that by making this regular walk, Jean was actively inhabiting her locale, creating a sense of relative safety, as part of which strategy she continued to monitor the area for signs of danger.

Ways of inhabiting one's locale – so as to make it familiar – are varied. In another example, among homeless people in New Zealand, Brett regularly travelled the city, putting his walks to music using an MP3 player (Hodgetts et al. 2009). In this way he actively retextured the streets, creating a sense of comfort and familiarity, and a sense of certainty and place that had significance beyond the various locations stitched into his journeys (Bull 2000).

A very different story was told by Michael, who took two kinds of photograph – those representing places in London used by homeless people, and those showing many of the larger and newer building developments that represented the world of people with resources and options.



FIGURE 5. Bin.

He explained this in relation to the photographic exercise:

Ah well, it makes you think a bit more different than if I was just seeing what I photographed – it would be just thoughts. But when you take a photograph it becomes a bit more significant, you know. Photographs, I don't know. When someone looks at a photograph they don't see what I see. Ah, it's hard to explain. It's a good question. But it's hard to explain.

Michael expressed the impossibility of making the transition from being homeless to being domiciled:

The others [photos] are a bit more to do with wanting to break free, you know, seeing, like travelling, like I said to you a while ago. I wouldn't know where to go. If you said to me, 'Right, there's a free bus pass, where would you go?' I'm still going to be homeless at the end of the day . . . You feel like you've got to keep moving but you don't know where, when you get there, wherever that is, still you feel like you've got to keep moving.

Where does walking fit in to this man's world? Above all he spoke about the experience of repeatedly being 'moved on' by those in authority. This evokes the idea of enforced walking, of having to keep moving, in part because there is nowhere that you can call 'home'. Walking in this example is very much a condition, a way of life that circles around but never breaks free. It is, in Hannah Arendt's (1958) terms, 'a labour of the body' being merely self-sustaining, forever walking but never getting anywhere.

The impossibility of making a break from homelessness was expressed in four photographs Michael took that involved movement away from the urban spaces he occupied. One was of a railway station; the other three



FIGURE 6. Street.

were of the river Thames. One of these is of two birds flying over the river. This is an interesting photograph because its use of light and contrast – together with the figures of the birds in motion – appeal to an aesthetic that draws upon the practices of photography as art. The image of the river evokes a natural world (not an urban one), its flowing waters conveying the idea of passage (beside the static bench on which he sits), while the birds, as he explained, are 'symbols of freedom to me'. Michael's pictures showed, he said, 'what a homeless person can do and what a homeless person can't do'.

Interestingly, it is the birds over the river Thames that animate the scene in this photograph. We adopt the idea of 'animating the crossing' from de Certeau (1984), who saw this potential exercised in 'storying'. Boundaries that are believed to be impassable or dangerous can be breached by dangers that transgress them. To give simple examples used by de Certeau, coming from the 'other side', as it were, the wolf breaches the forest, and the crocodile parts the river, both being 'mouthpieces of the limit', articulating what was previously inanimate (de Certeau 1984, 127). Of course, in this particular photograph, the birds are not dangerous. What we are reaching for here is the idea that the birds evoke for Michael a vision of 'walking' quite different to the one to which he was condemned. What sort of walking might he have had in mind? Walking to work, walking to visit friends, most of all walking home – all are possibilities that remain for him as distant as a walk to the moon.

WALKING AS OCCASION

So far we have distinguished between walking as a *means* and walking as a *condition*; to these two we now add walking as an *occasion*. In each case, the idea of what walking is about relates to the status of the photograph and the image. Only in the previous photograph of the

birds (Figure 4) do we get a sense that depiction is more than a designation – it is in some way expressive of an idea. In that sense, the image is not contained either in the photograph or even in the story. Both the showing and the telling approximate to an idea that the person would like to get across. In this case the idea is symbolic of his life, of a life ‘made to be walked’.

In this final example we show some pictures made by Jean, the woman mentioned earlier, who took night-time walks that established her safety (see Figures 5 and 6). In these photos, there is a symbolism infused in the act of picturing, so that the *making* of the photos – and the walking involved that achieved this – were themselves symbolic of her life. In this case, though, the symbolism is less about a condition than it is about a way of living on the streets.

Though previously a teacher, Jean had been homeless for more than 20 years. She used the photography study as an opportunity to communicate the detail of her life on the streets. However, this was not a matter of merely documenting where she went and what she saw, because she said:

I enjoyed taking the photographs. I enjoyed even more thinking that it could be a project. I was getting very excited about the idea that it could be a project, a story.

She said that she would walk around the streets pretending that she was a detective, looking for ‘little clues’ in the rubbish, especially odd buttons that she would put in jars. She would think about the person who had owned the buttons and make up stories, because ‘[i]t keeps you alive’. As Jonathan Raban said, living on the streets, being exposed to the complex, fragmented and inchoate stimulation of the city, anyone might ‘find oneself unconsciously slipping into magical habits of mind’ (Raban 1974, 159). The city’s daily cascade of stimuli means that one’s imagination is always being stretched, as one collects signs – again we quote from Raban – like a ‘jackdaw’s nest of badges and trinkets’. About her interest in the rubbish in the city she said:

You go into a dream world. You go into a cartoon of a world. That you are a detective in a cartoon film. In other words, everything becomes totally different. The street itself takes on a completely different atmosphere and life



FIGURE 7. Headstone.

and everything and you are a different person altogether. You're a different thing altogether. You even use second-hand clothes as your different thing. You'll go on and get clothes from the clothing store. I would get a mac that looked like a detective's mac, you know, to be used as a prop for my world, that I would create, if I wanted to get through a night or two of homelessness. You would use it as a theatre.

So here 'walking' becomes like that of an actor traversing a stage. By contemplating in a detailed way the small discarded items around her, Jean was able, in a kind of *détournement* ('diversion'), to transform urban spaces in order to re-occupy them (Bassett 2004). This, in turn, allowed her to re-enter temporarily the world of the domiciled through the portals of this detritus, albeit that this entry was imaginary. In this way walking is part of an imaginary activity, a performance having aesthetic qualities. It is not unlike Simmel's (1959) idea of the adventure, something like a fragment 'torn from life'. It does more than reflect the person's world – it refracts it, giving it a shape and colour borrowed from other realms.

This idea of walking as part of Jean's project emerged alongside the stories she told us. In none of her pictures does she show herself walking through London, though she shows the streets down which she walks – streets that she said 'can claim you' when you walk them for long enough. That walking is an emergent feature in this case is integral with the fact that it is part of a performance. This does not make it any the less real than other kinds of walking, but it draws our attention to it in a different way. Walking is not pictured, nor is it referred to as a means; still less is it invoked as a condition, though this is implied in the mundane alternative to making the photos a project. Instead, walking is re-figured in the style of a detective – as a style of life. It is imaginary, even as it is set against the detritus of the city. Another way to put this is that, for Jean, walking to make the pictures was turned from an instance (a means) into an occasion. The word 'walking' is then both a label for a particular activity and also a reference to particular episodes in which other elements of her life are refracted for her. These occasions made their own time, ordering and storying events prior to her talking to us about them.

RE-SEARCH AND RE-WALKING

We have distinguished between three ways of walking – as *means*, as *condition* and as *occasion* – in order to show how this practice can be made to signify in different ways. The re-storying of photographs made in the course of the project allowed movements between these three

ways of representation, so that what walking seems to be can be different at different times. However, all three forms can seemingly appear at one time, or else be re-invoked through different ways of talking about the pictures on subsequent occasions. As researchers, we made these distinctions in the course of collecting data, as well as on reflection afterwards. By this we mean that the researchers' own walking could also be made part of the evidence available for analysis.

To illustrate this, consider the picture shown in Figure 7 of a gravestone, photographed by Bruce, a homeless man in Auckland, New Zealand. The photograph shows the tombstone of his mother's grave, and to obtain this picture two of the researchers had to accompany him, as required by staff at the detoxification centre he attended.

When the researchers arrived at the cemetery Bruce strode in a straight line towards the site of his mother's grave, even though this meant walking across other graves. The researchers described him as walking at a very fast pace, gazing into the distance, so that their own walking was interspersed with small sprints in order to keep up. This was, he said later, how he always walked, and the suppleness of his gait indicated that he walked a lot. When they caught up with him he was standing at his mother's grave and talking both to her and them, as though they were all in the same room together.

The effort this homeless man expended to get the picture was important in understanding the import of the photograph obtained. This was a walk as a means to an end but, in accompanying him and reflecting upon it later, we came to understand that it was also a walk that acquired meaning from the story it made possible. It was several things at once: a means to a picture; an instance of the condition of being a homeless person; and, in the emergent story told as we walked towards the gravestone, it occasioned the possibility that he might break free of his addictions. Considering the photograph of the gravestone later, he said:

And now I have hopes that I can clean up from my addictions, have a home and get back to some sort of normality in life. If you haven't got hope you haven't got nothing – yeah. That's my story of my nine years on the streets of central Auckland [*tears and sniffing*]. I'm OK. It gets a bit emotional. In those nine years on the streets aye my mother died, which shattered me. I've had a hard life through my addictions. And I tried to be a good person and survive in a marriage, but guess my addictions brought the marriage to an end. And I spent a long time running away from – I don't know what I was

running from, but I was just running and it brought me to this point here.

In this case the production of photographic meaning relates to shared experiences gained from both participant and researchers walking together. However, this walk was prefaced and justified by the story Bruce told in planning the walk, so that we should be careful not to see images only as being consequential to walking. The following example points up how the manner of walking can derive from pictures already made, re-storied in the course of the data collection that promoted this walk.

Phil, a Maori man in his early 40s, had been homeless for nearly 30 years since he was 14 years of age. During the initial interview he used a picture-book history of his tribe to introduce himself in a culturally patterned manner. Phil leafed through the book and talked to, and about, the people in the pages. As a Maori person, he saw his life as a continuation of people depicted on the pages and as being anchored in specific places and relationships shown through the confines of the cover and beyond. He talked ('walked') the researcher through his and others' past, recounting walks he used to take with family along an old forestry railroad track. In the process he used the pictures in the book to take the researcher back in time and along for the walk.

Phil: This book is me, that's who we are . . . That's my great grandmother and that's my *marae* [village/meeting area] . . . that's my dad's side . . . This was all bush up through our valley . . . See go across this little bridge and then go way up the bush. This is who we are and these are our chiefs . . . These are our saw mills and that's the river right there . . . And when we used to go hunting we used to come across the old forestry rail tracks. 'Hey that was those train tracks.' It's clear like a walking track, hey. No bush or nothing hey. And we just left it like that hey, for our walks through the bush. And my grandfather used to be on that one . . . [points to a photograph of the area] . . . and the school now is over here. And there's our route and I used to go up there and I could see for miles.

Phil uses the photographs in the book to take the researcher on a 'walk back home' and thereby show who he is. He makes the pictured walk an occasion for remembering, communicating his sense of belonging and place to the researcher, who is 'following him around'. His tour provides a means of exploring the place and relationships he hopes to return to in a future when he is no longer homeless.

In the course of this analysis we can see how our earlier claim, that still images are anything but still, can be revealed. They have movement and are crafted in the interaction between researcher and participant as they take the imaginary stroll. This means that we should not restrict walking as a concept to a physical journey; imaginary or recalled walks can also allow people to weave together past, present and future. In this example Phil is 'walking home with the researcher', back through the past to create an occasion in the present.

What we are pointing to here is that walking as a narrative act involves a linking together of places and times, that it is a means and a performative fragment that shows – shows forth – something of the story that it both pre-figures and is part of. This idea of showing forth is not just a matter of the story displaying the experience of the walk. It also draws upon productive features that involve the bodies of the walkers – including, where appropriate, the investigator – so that what were felt and seen are drawn upon in the re-telling. To use walking as part of methodology is not too different from using photography alone, because both employ frameworks to separate out a time and place. One does this through the lens, the other through contour and track. Just as a photo inserts itself into a crack in the discourse, so a walk separates out time and space in the course of which sensory referents are brought into being. Here and now, on this street, in this valley, whatever story – about being a detective, about one's family – is re-made using the materiality of the moment. In this mode, walking is more than re-inscription because it involves transformation across modalities, walking and storying. Either directly, as in an accompanied walk, or indirectly, as in the story of the walk, the tour takes time, and makes it as well.

DISCUSSION

We have talked about walking as practice from the perspective of a researcher interested in the visual. We justify this focus by saying that walking to take pictures is to ask people to turn upon their setting in a way that activates them, putting them into a productive mode. This makes the spaces and places that can dominate life into a field for their own exploration. For example, for homeless people, using the camera to picture buildings owned by the rich and spaces occupied by the well-heeled enables these individuals to tell their story. In being made into a project (if seen in this way), the act of walking is to cross boundaries, to express one's condition and to perform imaginatively, consistent with de Certeau's emphasis upon the resistive potential of walking.

The issue of walking and discourse (talk about walking) raises the question of whether one can ever study something that is beyond our ways of talking about it. The very fact that academic work is carried on through discourse means that we must acknowledge that nothing of which we speak is ever beyond words. However, this does not justify the argument that because we have to speak of anything we study, this makes it essentially discursive, somehow constructed by discourse in its entirety. This is what one of us has previously called a position of 'naïve constructionism' (Radley 1995). We can and do apprehend the world, other people and ourselves in ways not articulated discursively. Feelings are more richly articulated through music or dance or the plastic arts – and while we do render something of these matters in talk, there is no sense in trying to translate them into verbal discourse.

Of course pictures have discursive features too, and can narrate, and indeed we should avoid the error of polarising the verbal and the visual as if these were separate worlds. The mundane truth of everyday life is that we live in a world of words *and* pictures, of sensations *and* articulations. We can never get beyond discourse, but neither are we ever wholly contained within its articulatory schemes.

This failure to be able to denote *in toto*, to sum up the world completely, is in a way the 'fault' of discourse. This is because we are forever talking about what *might* exist, what *could* be made to happen, what *could indeed be made* in the material world. The idea of 'fault' is interesting because it leads on to the idea that there are fault lines or cracks in discourse, through which we apprehend differently, creating the invitation to communicate or explain to others. These things apprehended differently are sometimes the unanticipated consequences of actions like walking, of being people who fashion a material world and suffer its outcomes. So, rather than seeing the non-discursive as beyond or in excess of discourse (for how could we ever know it?), we prefer to speak of experiences or relationships that appear as cracks or tears in the fabric of discourse. These tears can occur as major events in times of crisis, or of change, such as when people fall ill or become homeless. We 'fall through' the discourse, if you like, so that words that appear inadequate to express the suffering (or joy) entailed are extended through the use of pictures as referents – for example, through the need to justify why, where and how any particular photograph was taken.

Walking is one way in which the fault lines of discourse can be exploited, as illustrated here in the homeless woman's attempt to turn a photography exercise into a 'project', thus enabling an imaginary world to appear through the transmutation of material features that her walking connected and traversed. However, our research shows this to be just one way in which walking appears for homeless people, who share in the everyday means of walking while suffering, through their enforced walking, a way of being that confirms their otherness.

In the light of this argument we might say the following: what is special about walking as part of social research is that it tears at the fabric of symbols and voiced conventions to produce traces and dissonances that invite repair – repair through storying the journeys made. This might be done by an individual or by people together, and equally can involve the researcher in this production. What the researcher then draws upon are traces shared and made with respondents in the small journeys that it takes to frame a photograph – or a tour – and to talk about it afterwards. The walk is then, paradoxically, both source and product of the course of the investigation.

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